

A Head Start Journey

Terri Denomie

JARMA WRIGHTEN: Hi, we're here at the National Indian Head Start Association Director's Conference, and today we're interviewing and talking with parents and sharing about their role as parents as teachers in the home. And we have with us today...

TERRI DENOMIE: Terri Denomie.

JARMA: And Terri's going to tell us a little about herself, and give us a little overview or highlight about her history in Head Start, and how she's helped supported her child's growth – or children's growth and development as they were enrolled in the Head Start Program, and then just the values of Head Start, and then words of advice for other parents.

TERRI: Okay, thank you. I started my Head Start career back in 1965. It was the first year that Head Start originated, and I was four years old. I was a Head Start student. I really enjoyed the field trips, and that's my – my most fondest memories of Head Start was the field trips, and having lots of fun in school.

And as years went on, my grandparents took me on a trip down state when I was in ninth grade, and my cousin was going to Head Start at the time, and my aunt was to be the parent volunteer that day, and she had asked if I wanted to go. And I said, "Sure, I'll go to school." So I went to school that day with my cousin, and played all day, and I remember coming home and telling my grandma, "Grandma, when I get older, I want to be a teacher. I want to be a Head Start teacher. All they do is play all day long. That's the funnest job you could ever have." And she told me, she said, "You'd make a good teacher, you know, you – you do well with kids." And I always kept that in the back of my mind, and I love – I love children.

I always babysat, so as I had my own daughter, I went to – when she was three years old, I went to the local Head Start, and I thought she was going to be an only child, so I got her in there. She was three – they usually don't take three-year-olds – and I was a low-income mother at the time. So she went to school, and while she was in school, I found out that I was also pregnant for my second child.

So I was the parent manager for the Head Start program – our local Head Start program, and it wasn't our tribal program, which I'm a member of, and – I couldn't get her in, because she wasn't a four-year-old. So I continued in the – in the county Head Start program, and went to school quite often with her. They made me the parent manager. If somebody didn't show up, they'd call me, and I'd go and show up.

The children got to watch my belly get bigger as – the more pregnant I got, and my son was born in March. So I brought him into school with me and showed the children of my daughter's group what a little baby was like, and – I took him to school as often as I could, and then school was out for the summer and she went back the following year.

And then I had a couple years off of Head Start, and then when my son was Head Start-age, there was a job advertised for a teacher's assistant. And I thought, "You know what, I'm going to go try that. I'm going to try." I was working as a waitress. My husband was working in the woods during the day. So I went and interviewed for the job, and the same day they called me and told me that I had the job. So, I then went to school as a teacher's assistant while my son was in Head Start – of course, in separate classrooms – so there's where my – that's where my profession began as a – as a teacher's assistant.

I – I started going to school for my – for my preschool CDA. And the following year there were budget cuts in Head Start, and they had told me that, in order to keep my job, I'd have to work these odd hours, and I wouldn't be able to keep benefits. So I seen that the tribe had advertised for a Parent-Child Center Teacher, so I thought, "Well, I'm – I'm going to give it a try." I'm a tribal member, and I'm working on a CDA, and I met the minimal requirements, interviewed for that, and was hired the next day, and told on Wednesday I needed to be in Sioux St. Marie, which was 250 miles away, on the following Monday for in-service training. So, there I was. So, I – I started my – my career as the Parent-Child Center teacher.

Our community was having a hard time getting the program off the ground. We had slots for 20. I worked really hard that year, and I got my enrollment up to 28 children with parents – parents attended with the children. I would get resources, and different people in to work with parents while we worked with the children. I would – did that for a couple years, and I always kind of watched our Head Start program and wanted our Head Start program to – to be a good program, and when I seen that the job became available for the Head Start teacher, I did put in for that.

I had to move the school. Prior to that, I had to move my Parent-Child Center School, so now I'm looking at my third school. I had to pack up and move everything and make classrooms. And so I became the Head Start teacher, and I oversaw the Parent-Child Center program at the same time. So, I worked as the Head Start teacher from '95 until '98. And in 1998, Early Head Start came about to our community, and the Parent-Child centers closed down. So I then took on the job of overseeing the Head Start and the Early Head Start Programs, and we took our Head Start program from single-session of 20 children, to double-session of 40 children,...

JARMA: Wow.

TERRI: ...and then took on 24 slots for Early Head Start, and then later added four more slots. We obtained some renovation moneys. We turned in an old bingo hall into a huge – classrooms, and then obtained a USDA grant to add on a Head Start classroom – or a Head Start school.

So, at this point, I'm now at 62 children, I have a double-session Head Start, and 28 children in Early Head Start. And I'm looking to expand eight more children, and knock out a wall, and add another building on. So my – my career of being a Head Start child to a Head Start Director has – has grown immensely.

JARMA: It has. That – you've done a whole lot. In year '65, so when you were four years old – so you really know the true essence of Head Start – the foundation, from the front to the back end. So when

you had your children enrolled in Head Start, how did that make you feel, and what kinds of things did you do to ensure that they had the quality of education that you had?

TERRI: Well, it was very nice because I got to go to school while I was working, and I got to learn a lot more of motherhood, of how to take care of my own children. And I not only got to do that as a Parent-Child Center teacher, I worked with parents on the parenting skills then, also. So, where I live, in a small community, we – it's very rural, a lot of low-income, a lot of children having children.

I worked with parents that were coming from domestic violence, to fetal alcohol children. It – it was challenging – autistic children. So having my own children, it made me realize how fortunate I was that the education that I was getting while they were growing up...

JARMA: Yes, that is fortunate.

TERRI: ...and able to apply it with them.

JARMA: So now that you've walked that walk, you've had all that experience, you... How old are your children now?

TERRI: My daughter will be 26, my son is 22, and I now have a 21-month-old grandson in my Early Head Start program.

JARMA: So now, the – the torch keeps continuing to being passed on. So what are your two children doing that were in Head Start? Where are they today?

TERRI: My son is just moving into his own house, as we speak, with his son and – and soon wife-to-be. And my daughter went to school to be a Head Start teacher, got her degree, but she moved on to our public school as a high school tutor, tutoring middle school and high school children. So, she worked in the Head Start field for seven years.

JARMA: Wow, that's excellent. So she gave back to Head Start, and that's what Head Start loves to see – those who come, those who come back. Yes. So what would be words of advice, or words of encouragement that you'd share and give to other parents about being that first teacher, learning how to trot your path or make the road map, so that you'd have a great path?

TERRI: Words of advice to – that I give to many parents is, "Always be the parent that you always wanted, always be the teacher that you always wanted, and always be there for your child." And – and I always tell parents of these younger children – they're always – when they go through the stage of, "They're always saying – they're always asking, 'Why, why, why?'" And I always tell them, "Tell them why, tell them why." Our children are like – to me they're like a – like a computer: the more input you give, the more input you put into your children, the more output later in life you're going to get from them.

I've seen too many children sit in a crib all day long, and – and come to school and not have the basics that they need, or – or don't know how to talk, or haven't been in the – haven't been around other

children. Where the children now, because we have these Early Childhood programs from zero to three, we're able to take them, and nurture them from... We've had children in there three weeks old, and we try to keep them with the same teacher for their first three years of life. The teacher follows them for three years, until they go into our Head Start program.